

The Left in Latin America

Theory and Practice

by

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The socialist camp that once offset the dominance and imperial ambitions of the United States in Latin America no longer exists, but the advances of neoliberalism are being countered by newly elected representatives who reject a world that promotes wealth for the few and deepens the poverty of the majority. The emerging progressive governments have limited programs and resources, and while the conditions for a profound transformation may have been established, the transformation itself may not be possible until well into the future. Marta Harnacker, a close observer, has suggested that being leftist today “means to fight or be committed to a societal project that opposes the capitalist logic of profit-making and that seeks to build a society with a humanistic logic” (2002: 4). The oasis of the Latin American left, she feels, is the World Social Forum, based in Porto Alegre, Brazil, with initiatives emanating from social movements and nongovernmental organizations and skepticism of the political parties of the left, whose positioning has often approximated the practices and rhetoric of the traditional conservative and liberal parties.

Many questions face the progressive scholar interested in Latin America. At the top of my list, and something that I have recently examined in detail (see Chilcote, 2000a; 2000b; 2000c; 2002; n.d.), is whether a globalization perspective is useful today and how it relates to the historical experience of U.S. domination and the prospects for real development in a complex capitalist world. I have argued that an uncritical and widespread usage of the term “globalization” appears to be diverting attention from the negative impact of capitalist development and imperialism and that “globalization” tends to be employed as an ideologically and politically motivated concept implying that a harmonious and integrated world has been evolving to mitigate tensions and struggles that historically have disrupted the international political

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economy. I suggest, to the contrary, that globalization be understood as a manifestation of imperialism and the devastating capitalist order.

Other important research themes include the role of the state in public and private capital formation and the provision of essential services to all people in need, the possibility of the replacement of formal or representative democracy with new forms of participatory democracy in the political economy, and the prospects for grassroots and social movements in place of the traditional political parties and institutions in mobilizing people to overcome poverty and inequality.

Global capitalism and U.S. hegemony challenge us to reassess old ideas and search for new theories. At the same time, left participation in formal representative politics offers the possibility of new perspectives, and successful peaceful transitions based on national political alliances may lead to theoretical advances. The question is how to find a way to provide for the human needs of all people, to encourage solidarity and collaboration in mobilizing exploited peoples to escape their misery, and to implement a push toward political and economic egalitarianism through the socialization of the means of production.

More than a decade ago, I set forth a left research agenda based on theoretical alternatives and practical realities (Chilcote, 1990). In Latin America, the death of Che Guevara in 1967 had resulted in a reassessment of strategies in rural guerrilla warfare. The suppression of urban revolutionary movements (especially in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay) during the 1970s had had an impact on revolutionaries and leftist intellectuals, and the overthrow of Allende in 1973 undermined the movement seeking a peaceful road to socialism. While these developments did not altogether deter revolutionary movements, especially in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador, the left began to move toward a diversity of perspectives, and the communist parties long dominant within the Marxist left continued the splintering observable since the early 1960s, leading to coalitions and alliances with other progressive forces, as in the cases of Brazil and Mexico.

During the 1980s "the Age of Gorbachev" was accompanied by rapprochement with the United States and a gradual withdrawal of Soviet influence and involvement in Latin America. With its collapse the Soviet Union abruptly broke with Cuba, where Fidel Castro had already made clear that his country would not pursue the policies of glasnost and perestroika. The continuing U.S. policy of undermining revolutionary movements led to the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and to peace treaties in El Salvador and elsewhere, signifying a shift from warfare to participation of the left in electoral politics.

In the 1990s U.S. policy under the Clinton administration encouraged electoral regimes, neoliberal favoritism for the private sector, and multilateral trade under the North American Free Trade Agreement. The burden of debt continued to weigh heavily on Latin America; in particular, Argentina's economy was close to collapse. The early years of the ensuing decade under the Bush administration saw more of the same U.S. policy.

Given these experiences, the major issue today is how the emerging and popular progressive regimes can shift resources to begin to deal with basic needs of people. In its transition to socialism, the Cuban revolution early on began to shift resources to basic needs and achieved remarkable results in education and health. The Allende regime in Chile and the Sandinistas in Nicaragua planned for similar needs but were thwarted by counterrevolutionary movements. Contemporary governments advocating popular reforms face the familiar problems of pluralism under minority rule or lack of commitment under majority rule, the undermining of state authority, and the persistent influence of traditional institutions such as the Church and the military. Under pluralism, dominant forces tend to rule through a dispersion of interests. Popular forces, including the social movements, may fragment in the face of bourgeois dominance while traditional parliamentary groups and parties rise to power. A low level of development of the capitalist forces of production and external pressures and interventions interfere with possibilities for development and progress.

The election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Lucio Gutiérrez in Ecuador, and Luiz Inácio (Lula) da Silva in Brazil has raised hopes for change from above that may result in the allocation of resources to the poor. Yet Chávez has been confronted with desperate reaction and a lengthy strike with the objective of bringing about his downfall. Gutiérrez, who was elected with support of leftist parties, social movements, and indigenous peoples in rural areas, is untested, and his administration's early commitment to reform is questionable. Lula has initially chosen a conciliatory course intended to build on a popular consensus that he offers hope for change. The present conjuncture suggests constraints on available resources but an immediate need for deep reform and decisive measures to shift resources to the broad population.

Where progressive regimes have not emerged, the left has relied on progressive political parties, organized labor unions, new social movements, and popular alliances in seeking needed changes to benefit people. In the search for participatory democracy, there has been continuing interest in reforming political parties and popular movements. For instance, during the 1990s the meetings of the São Paulo Forum brought left intellectuals and leaders together in search of new strategies and tactics. The ideas that emerged may

have contributed to successes in urban areas where leftists have risen to political power. The Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' party—PT) has experienced success in Porto Alegre, São Paulo, and other municipalities. Even more conspicuous have been the actions of the Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Workers' Movement—MST) in the Brazilian countryside and the Zapatistas in Chiapas. We are less aware of the mobilization of local peoples in the barrios and favelas of large cities in Latin America, where people have directly confronted their problems with limited material but abundant human resources. A close look at the popular assemblies in hundreds of neighborhoods in Buenos Aires illustrates how people at the grass roots are addressing problems of food distribution, health care, welfare, and transportation. Similar movements mobilized around the belief that the people can govern themselves are evident in Ecuador and Peru as well as Mexico.

I continue to believe that there is important work to be undertaken in three areas: (1) study of the capitalist state in all its forms (fascist, corporative, bureaucratic authoritarian, national security, neoliberal, socialist, and so on), giving priority to class forces (dominant and popular) and class struggle and relating the analysis of groups and institutions to a class context; (2) continuing investigation of development possibilities but concretely, as capitalist accumulation and development of the forces of production within capitalism and the possibility of transition to socialism; and (3) a serious look at democracy and socialism in all their forms (social democratic, democratic socialist, revolutionary socialist, and so on), with careful attention to direct, informal, and participatory democracy and its possibilities.

Among the important issues and questions might be the impact of capital on class and institutional forces, especially in the reorganization of capital both within nations and throughout the international capitalist system. In examining the question of class, we need to look at the new middle classes in the public sector or state and their role at both national and international levels. In view of the inclination of many observers (including some on the left) to depreciate the role of the urban labor movement, we also need to reassess the traditional conflict between labor and capital, examining the strategies whereby labor sometimes aligns itself with capital or the state to obtain short-term benefits and how these strategies relate to the worldwide labor movement and international capital. We also need to pay attention to the ever-evolving organization of labor in the countryside. The breakup or unity of labor movements could be assessed along with the implications of conflict within the domestic and international ruling capitalist classes. Given the need to develop the capitalist forces of production in less developed countries moving toward socialism and to identify strategies that avoid violence, it

would be useful to examine how progressive forces might penetrate state apparatuses and effect changes from within.

Given the successes and failures of the various attempts to apply one or another Marxism to the contemporary situation, left intellectuals have been searching for a “new” democracy and a “new” socialism. In the democratic openings out of dictatorship, although the political rhetoric may have suggested the possibility of socialism, in reality there may be no socialist transition because not all the means of production are socialized and the popular classes do not achieve power. In the end, capitalism and bourgeois economic interests stem the socialist tide, the new regimes evolve from radical possibilities to representative parliamentary and social democratic forms, and the political parties overshadow the popular and revolutionary movements. Attempts at direct participatory democracy are undermined by formal representative forms.

An important question is whether economic and political crises can be resolved without more direct and participatory democracy. We must also ask what kind of democracy and socialism are possible as mainstream political forces insist on the parliamentary process and the dominance of political parties. Furthermore, if pluralism is premised on individual choice, bargaining, and compromise, what are the prospects for alliances and coalitions of popular movements outside the political party system and for successful resistance to the declassing of the socialist project altogether? We need to account for global communication and information transfer through the Internet and its potential use by and impact on mobilizing left forces around the world. There is also the question of revolutionary strategy in a transition to democracy and the drive toward socialism and the role of class and class struggle in the search for a theory of the transformation. At issue here is the working class as revolutionary agent.

The road to socialism will be difficult whether it is evolutionary or revolutionary. The level of the productive forces and the seemingly insurmountable problems of external and internal debt, inflation, unemployment, and so on, appear to stifle progress toward socialism and democracy. The persistence and pervasiveness of capitalism are significant obstacles to the implantation of socialism. In their effort to avoid deterministic and reductionist analysis, many progressive intellectuals have retreated from Marxism in favor of a broadly conceived pluralism extending beyond the working class to such other social movements as those of feminists, ecologists, and pacifists. These movements become relevant in the context of a class analysis that examines the mobilizing possibilities for both urban and rural workers as well as the spontaneous and organized mobilization of people in poor urban areas and in

the countryside. Serious work on these themes may mitigate the crisis of Marxism and stimulate new thinking as theory is applied to the conditions being shaped by people determining their own destinies at a local level while confronting the influences and pervasive impacts of a maturing international capitalist order.

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